

Class, patriarchy and ethnicity on Sri Lankan plantations

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Review of Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations: Two Centuries of Power and Protest by Kumari Jayawardena and Rachel Kurian (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan 2015; pp 364, INR 825)

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Kumari Jayawardena and Rachel Kurian have uncovered the injustices heaped upon the plantation community of immigrant Tamil and oppressed caste origin by the powerful – while recovering their individual and collective acts of resistance in the struggle for human dignity – in an important work of engaged scholarship drawing on archival records in Britain, India, the Netherlands and Sri Lanka; supplemented by interviews over three decades with politicians, trade unionists and others; and a comprehensive survey of the secondary literature.

Their core categories are class, patriarchy, and ethnicity. In particular, the authors underline the tenacity through time of the ‘plantation patriarchy’: an economic and social system that upholds the privileged position of men and the subordination of women within the plantation. “In many ways”, say the authors, “women workers on the plantations could be viewed as the ‘slaves of slaves’”.

This particular manifestation of patriarchy, “assimilated social hierarchies and gender biases stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices into the structure of the labour regime and social organisation on plantations”.

Planter Raj

Part one discusses the emergence and consolidation in the 19th century of the ‘Planter Raj’. The planter was afforded almost complete authority and impunity within the plantation, and enjoyed enormous influence on labour, economic and social policy elsewhere.

The plantation was a ‘total institution’, at once home, community, and workplace for its labouring population; where almost every aspect of the life of the worker – from ‘womb to tomb’ as the Planters’ Association repeats to this day – are situated within its boundaries: including educational, health, spiritual, recreational, and so on. By design it was, and to a great extent remains, distanced – spatially, administratively, and legally – from the rural social formation in which it is implanted.

Jayawardena and Kurian make a sustained case for how “force and compulsion” or extra-economic coercion “were inherent to the nature of labour relations on the plantations”; including by means of debt-bondage and a captive labour-force.

In British Ceylon they argue, ideologies and practices from the Atlantic plantations combined with indigenous and pre-capitalist beliefs and institutions – including caste, religion, forced labour (rajakariya) and patriarchy – to forge “a new kind of slavery”.

Outsiders

The weakening of the tyrannical Planter Raj is tracked from the early 20th century in the second part. Segregated as they were in the hill country districts, and being monolingual Tamil speakers, the plantation workers neither participated in, nor appeared to be affected by, the growing militancy of urban and largely Sinhala-speaking workers at the turn of the century.

Initially it was ‘outsiders’ of diverse social origins and convictions: ranging from liberal bureaucrats, to reform-minded urban professionals, followed by radical labour activists, and the anti-imperialist Left, who protested the working and social conditions of the tea and rubber workers.

Indian nationalists including MK Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and EV Ramasamy (‘Periyar’) visited the island and spoke out on the welfare of Tamil plantation workers. The remarkable Gujarati couple Manilal Maganlal Doctor and Jayunkvar Manilal (Mehta) who had championed the cause of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius, South Africa and Fiji, landed in 1921 to do the same, only to be deported by the British within months.

The best remembered ‘outsider’ is the Tamil Brahmin journalist Natesa Aiyar, who campaigned for labour rights including higher minimum wages; higher wages for women (who were paid less than men); and abolition of child labour. In 1931 he founded the All Ceylon Indian Estate Labour Federation which by 1940 claimed membership of 37,000, and branches in Badulla, Hatton and Nuwara Eliya.

Women such as Meenachi Ammal struggled for women’s equality including of franchise. She was a labour organiser, co-editor of the Desabhaktan newspaper (along with her husband Natesa Aiyar), public speaker, lyricist, and singer.

Class struggle

Part three is located in the 1930s and 1940s in the lead-up to decolonisation. The seeds of organisation and politicisation of plantation workers, sown among others by the left-wing Lanka Sama Samaja Party, bore fruit in greater militancy, self-organisation, and heightened struggles for labour and political rights.

These were the decades of extra-legal strikes, occupations, and physical confrontation with thugs and the police, for recognition of trade unions; dismissal of head kanganies (labour contractors and overseers) and kanakapulles (accountants); higher wages; and shorter working days, among other demands.

However, the class struggle was never one-sided. The planters fought tooth and nail to break the resistance of the workers, aided and abetted by the colonial state and its armoury.

Meanwhile, Sinhala nationalist politicians stoked anti-Indian xenophobia by pointing to their number (one million or one-sixth of the population in 1939); blaming the urban Malayali and Tamil workers and the rural plantation workers for the problem of unemployment, and agitating for their repatriation to India.

Three pieces of legislation: the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948; the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949; and the Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949 – some enacted with the support of North-Eastern Tamil and Muslim legislators – systematically stripped plantation workers of the right to vote and permanent residence, leave alone nationality, in the country many had been born and almost all had ever known.

Disenfranchisement and Statelessness

Part four dramatises how the aftermath of disenfranchisement and statelessness from the 1950s onwards framed and formed the post-colonial identity of the plantation community.

Its parliamentary representation was reduced to zero in 1952. Its struggles as an exploited class intertwined with those of an oppressed ethnic minority; estranged from urban workers through geographical isolation and Tamil ethnic and linguistic identity, and stigmatised by other Tamil-speakers for its recent immigration, class, and caste origin.

Further miseries were visited upon them. Large numbers were deported to the south of India, dumped to live and labour in its 'tea gardens', under agreements in 1964 and 1974 between the governments of Ceylon and India. The Left parties, once fighters for equality and workers' rights but now in coalition politics, caved into ethnic chauvinism and supported these 'Pacts'.

The Left had long advocated nationalisation of the plantations and had its way by 1975. A Sinhala youth insurrection four years earlier, blamed on high levels of unemployment and land hunger, stung the government into taking-over of large estates.

The shift from private to state ownership did not change labour relations on the plantations. Instead, stateless workers and their families were expelled from the estates, losing their only shelter and income; while the reduction in the rice ration and rocketing prices of essentials (rice by 600% and kerosene by 500% between 1970 and 1974) condemned others to destitution and death by starvation.

Further, in the anti-Tamil riots of 1977, 1981 and 1983 and in sporadic communal attacks thereafter, the plantation community periodically suffered loss of life and property, and displacement; leading some to migrate to the Vanni where they were caught up in the battles there to its bitter end.

State Ownership

Following the exit of private interests, and with the state now at once owner, employer and manager of the plantations, pressure was brought to bear on the government to improve social provisioning through upgrading the centuries-old 'line rooms'; greater resourcing of estate health services especially maternity care; and absorption of estate schools into the national education system.

There were also raised expectations among plantation workers that as public sector employees, their incomes would rise. In April 1984, hundreds of thousands went on strike for nine days. The government conceded a substantial increase in wages for men and women. Significantly the trade

unions won their demand for the equalisation of women and men's wages and the daily wage of women workers rose by 70%.

Those who were able to claim their citizenship also began to regain their franchise. Over time, the plantation community electorate expanded in numbers; allowing for their direct representation in parliament from 1977 onwards after a hiatus of thirty years.

A combination of factors including countering sympathy for Tamil separatism in the North and East; anxieties over a new front in the hill country through tie-ups between North-Eastern Tamil militants and Plantation Tamils; as well as the vote bank that trade union boss Saumyamoorthy Thondaman brought his coalition partners, contributed to the gradual restoration of citizenship rights to all - beginning in 1986 and only ending in 2003.

Privatisation

Part five spans the end of the 20th century and up to the present, taking up some contemporary issues. Though relatively late in the sequencing of neo-liberal reforms, the plantations were privatised in a staggered process between 1992 and 1996. The new employers were disinterested in non-production issues of water, sanitation, housing, and estate infrastructure.

These former obligations were assigned to the Plantation Human Development Trust, and to multilateral agencies, and international non-governmental organisations with uneven outcomes.

Post-privatisation despite greater state provisioning, partial integration into national delivery systems, and substantial donor funding, the plantation community lags behind other sections of the poor when it comes to household income, nutrition of mothers and children, school completion, higher education enrolment, life expectancy, sexual and reproductive health rights etc., and is denied ownership of housing and land.

Trade unions are legitimately criticised as hierarchical, authoritarian and patriarchal workers' organisations, which are in long-term decline. Instead non-governmental and community-based-organisations are canvassed, over-expectantly in my view, as new agents for social justice and in 'deepening democracy' in the plantations.

The changing consciousness of the plantation community is highlighted in the assertion and politics of a Malaiyaha ('Hill Country') Tamil identity in place of the 'Indian Tamil' one foisted upon them. An over-reliance on secondary sources and a handful of informants, an unnecessary excursus into academic debates on human development, and indulgent estimation of Thondaman's historical role make this the least satisfactory part of an otherwise fecund and fluent people's history.

In *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations*, Kumari Jayawardena and Rachel Kurian offer an indispensable point of departure to explore the past, present and future of the people whose blood, sweat and tears has sustained export revenues for 200 years, shedding light on how the island's political economy has been shaped in ways yet little known and even less appreciated.

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P.S.

*http://island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=146769

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